

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 7

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Reichenbach, Bruce (1987) "Hasker On Omniscience," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss1/7>

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HASKER ON OMNISCIENCE

Bruce Reichenbach

I contend that William Hasker's argument to show omniscience incompatible with human freedom trades on an ambiguity between altering and bringing about the past, and that it is the latter only which is invoked by one who thinks they are compatible. I then use his notion of precluding circumstances to suggest that what gives the appearance of our inability to freely bring about the future (and hence that omniscience is incompatible with freedom) is that, from God's perspective of foreknowledge, it is as if the event has already occurred, but that as if conditions do not tell us about the conditions under which the act was performed (whether it was free or not).

William Hasker's article on omniscience and human freedom contributes significantly to the debate regarding their consistency.¹ Combining breadth with analytic carefulness, he has clearly articulated, better than many others, not merely the grounds for holding that omniscience is incompatible with human freedom, but how the incompatibilist would respond to the most recent defenses of their compatibility. Yet, despite his efforts, I remain unpersuaded. Though this only might suggest something about my obstinacy in the face of incontrovertible evidence, it might also reveal the complexity of an issue which has long plagued Western theistic discussions. I would hope that it is the latter, but whatever the case, Hasker's challenge cannot be lightly dismissed. In what follows I want to explore what seems to me to be a problem with Hasker's discussion, a problem which, if I am correct, relieves the threat to the compatibilist from Hasker's proposed dilemma: either we give up the traditional view of omniscience and deny that God has beliefs or knowledge of future free acts of agents, or else we commit ourselves to the dubious doctrine that we can alter the past.

To begin, Hasker contends that invoking the distinction between hard and soft facts will not rescue the compatibilist; indeed, to the contrary, the distinction, if carefully laid out, provides support for the incompatibilist. In particular, he argues that

(14) "Yahweh has always believed that Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow"

is a hard fact, and that this, along with other hard facts:

(15) "If Yahweh exists, Yahweh is God,"



and

(A2) "Necessarily, if God has always believed that a certain thing will happen, then that thing will happen,"

entails

(11) "Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow."

So, he writes, "(11), which is jointly entailed by a set of hard facts, is itself a hard fact: it is now unpreventable, so that it is utterly impossible that anyone at all, even God himself, should now have the power to bring it about that Clarence does not eat the omelet for breakfast tomorrow. If the analysis of 'hard facts' which we have given is sound, the incompatibilist is triumphant" (136).

According to Hasker, a hard fact is "defined as a proposition which is true (that is its factuality) and which is such that it is impossible that anyone should have the power to bring it about that it is false (that is its hardness)" (132-133). As such, a fact is hard if it is entailed by one or more hard facts, is a necessary truth, or is a true, future-indifferent proposition. Further,

(C1) "An elementary proposition is future-indifferent IFF it is consistent with there being no times after the present, and also consistent with there being times after the present" (133).

Finally, he argues that (14) is a hard fact because it is a future-indifferent proposition.

But what essential properties does Yahweh possess? Necessarily, in a *de re* sense, Yahweh is God. And since God is necessarily omniscient, if Yahweh exists, he is necessarily (in a *de re* sense) omniscient and cannot hold a false belief. But then (14) is a candidate for being a soft fact, for (14) is not a future-indifferent proposition. If Clarence does not have a cheese omelet tomorrow, i.e. if the world ended now, Yahweh would not have had the belief that Clarence would have a cheese omelet tomorrow. That is, if there were no times after the present time, then Yahweh would not have had the belief expressed in (14). Otherwise it would have been a false belief, something which Yahweh cannot entertain. But then, since (14) is a soft fact, Hasker's claim regarding (11)—that it is a hard fact since it is jointly entailed by a set of hard facts—is not true, and the incompatibilist—at least at this juncture—cannot so easily snatch the victor's laurels.

Hasker's reply to this is that we have appealed to *de re* necessity to establish our point, but only *de dicto* necessary truths are relevant to determining which propositions are future-indifferent. He makes this restriction on the ground that allowing *de re* considerations is too generous, such that "if considerations of this sort are relevant to the notion of a future-indifferent proposition, then there

will be few such propositions—but clearly, they are not relevant” (134).

Granted that a universal admission of *de re* considerations effectively destroys the usefulness of making a distinction between hard and soft facts, in that few hard facts would remain, still does it follow that they are always irrelevant? It would seem that they are relevant in those cases where *de re* considerations are directly germane to the determination of the hardness or softness of a fact, that is, germane to determining whether it is in someone’s power to make the proposition under consideration false. This means that *de re* considerations can be employed where they are relevant to determining whether the proposition under consideration is truly future-indifferent. The compatibilist then can argue that *de re* considerations are relevant to and cannot be excluded from considerations regarding Yahweh’s beliefs about the future, for since his beliefs must be true [a feature which distinguishes Yahweh’s beliefs from those of the ordinary person, which point makes Hasker’s introduction of (A2) relevant], his beliefs about the future cannot be future-indifferent; their truth depends necessarily on the future.

Of course, to invoke an exception to a general application might be deemed suspicious, so one cannot make everything hinge on such a contention. Determining a general principle of relevance would be tricky, if not impossible. On the other hand, it was in terms of irrelevance that Hasker excluded all *de re* considerations. The above considerations suggest that sometimes *de re* considerations are relevant, and that therefore the incompatibilist’s case cannot be made quite as easily as this. Our argument will be bolstered if we can go on to show that there is something amiss in the main body of the incompatibilist’s argument. To this we shall now turn.

Hasker’s main argument to show that omniscience is incompatible with human freedom he labels argument B. Briefly, it contends that if God has always believed a certain thing about how a person will act, it is not in that person’s power to bring it about that God has not always believed that thing, and hence, assuming that God has always believed that the person would act that way, that person cannot be free with respect to that act since he cannot refrain from doing what God has always believed he would do. What can be said about argument B? There seems to be an ambiguity in two [B4 & B5] of three of its crucial steps:

(B3’) “God has always believed that Clarence will have a cheese omelet tomorrow” (128),

(B4) “If God has always believed a certain thing, it is not in anyone’s power to bring it about that God has not always believed that thing,” and

(B5) “Therefore, it is not in Clarence’s power to bring it about that God has not always believed that he would have a cheese omelet for breakfast” (123).

And on this ambiguity rests an equivocation. The phrase “. . . bring it about that God has not always believed that thing” could either mean (a) bring it about that God has never believed that thing, or (b) bring it about that it once was but no longer is the case that God believed it. This latter [(b)] is not to be understood in the sense that God changed his belief at some point, for this is made impossible by God’s omniscience. Rather, it is to be understood in the sense of a person somehow altering, retroactively, a fact about God’s prior belief. It finds its clearest expression in Hasker’s

(19) “If at T_1 God had always believed that [Clarence would do X at T_2 , and it was in [Clarence’s] power to refrain from doing X at T_2 , then it was in [Clarence’s] power to bring it about that whereas it was true at T_1 that God had always believed that [Clarence] would do X at T_2 it was no longer true at T_2 that God had always believed that [Clarence] would do X at T_2 ” (148).

The truth of (B4) under the first interpretation [(a)] does not follow—as Hasker claims the truth of (B4) does—from the unalterability of the past, for it has nothing to do with altering the past, but rather with bringing about the past. The truth of (B4) under the second [(b)] follows from unalterability of the past. Now whereas (B4) in sense (b) is true, (B4) in sense (a) is not true, for given the antecedent it is still in my or Clarence’s power to bring it about that God has never believed a certain thing. It is only that that power has not been exercised. If it had been exercised, then God would not always have (never have) believed that thing.²

Now the issue of free agency has not to do with Clarence’s ability to alter a belief that God has about Clarence’s action. If the power to do otherwise entails the power to alter or change a belief that God already has, then given that God is omniscient and cannot entertain mistaken beliefs, the incompatibilist would appear to be assured of his victory at the outset. Rather it has to do with Clarence’s ability to bring about the future (freely) and coincidentally to bring about God’s belief in the first place. Regarding the latter, Clarence only needs the power to bring about God’s belief concerning his omelet eating, not the power to change a belief which God already has, for what beliefs God has about what Clarence does depend upon what Clarence does. Since it is in Clarence’s power to bring about what God has believed regarding his eating breakfast tomorrow, (B5), interpreted in the sense of (a), is false. Clarence can bring it about that God never believed he would have a cheese omelet for breakfast. And if (B5) is false, then, granted the validity of Hasker’s argument, either (or both) (B3’) or (B4) is false. As I have just argued, it is (B4), interpreted in sense (a), which is false. Correspondingly, (B5) interpreted in sense (b) is true—Clarence cannot alter a

belief which God already has—but irrelevant to the issue of freedom of agency.

Our argument rests on the distinction between bringing about and altering the past; how is this to be understood? In trying to understand George Mavrodes's interpretation of our power over the past, Hasker introduces the notion of precluding circumstances (147). According to this interpretation, we have the power to affect the past, but are precluded from doing so by certain circumstances. I believe that there is an insight here which provides a clue to resolving the omniscience problem, not by showing that altering the past or (19) makes sense, but by suggesting why there is a real difference between bringing about the past and altering it, and why it is only the former that the compatibilist need uphold; and in consequence, this insight provides a way out of Hasker's compatibilist dilemma.

To begin with, Hasker asks, "Why is it that [Clarence] (apparently) lacks freedom to do X at T_2 ? Because God always has believed that [Clarence] would do X at T_2 , which logically precludes [Clarence] from refraining from doing X at T_2 " (147). But one might carry this another step. What is it that precludes God from having always believed that Clarence would not do X at T_2 ? It is that Clarence does X at T_2 . That is, from God's perspective (that of foreknowledge), it is as if Clarence has already done X at T_2 . Thus, what it is that apparently precludes Clarence from refraining from doing X at T_2 is Clarence doing X at T_2 . But this relation—Clarence actually doing X at T_2 entailing that Clarence cannot refrain from doing X at T_2 —does not then remove Clarence's freedom regarding doing X at T_2 . It says nothing about the conditions under which Clarence does X at T_2 . To put it another way, if it is now true that Clarence will do X at T_2 , then there are certain precluding conditions—the truth of this—which necessitate that Clarence cannot refrain from doing X at T_2 . But the truth of this is conditioned by what Clarence does at T_2 . That is, what precludes Clarence from refraining to do X at T_2 is that, given that the proposition about his future act is true, it is as if Clarence has done X at T_2 .³

One might, of course, be perplexed about the "as if" here invoked. Yet I do not think it that hard to comprehend. Consider the following. Parsons (P) has invented a special machine which allows him to go back in time. He enters the machine in 1986 and finds himself in the presence of or, perhaps better, observing, Quigly (Q) in 1876. P is an authority on Q, and knows immediately the situation Q is in. Not only that, but he remembers reading about the particular decision or act which Q made in that situation. Thus one might argue that from P's perspective what Q decides is as if already done. It is not already done, since P is standing there waiting for Q to do it. He has gone back in time. Yet from P's perspective, which is of one come back from the future, it is as if already done, since he knows what Q does decide. Since P strongly believes in the unalterability of the past, it is not within Q's power to do something other than

what Q in fact does in that situation. From Q's perspective his decision is not already made nor is the action taken, so that it is in his power at that time to do either x or y. From his perspective, that he will do x rather than y is indeterminate; it is not yet done, though at the same time he can grant that P knows what he will do because for him it is as if he has already done it.

What is the significance of this introduction of precluding conditions? What it suggests is (1) a basis for a real difference between bringing about and altering the past, and (2) a basis for a difference between our inability to alter the past and our apparent inability to act freely in bringing about the future. Regarding (1), a person is precluded from altering the past because the past has already occurred. However, one is not precluded from bringing about the past (which is not future indifferent) because the past which is to be brought about has not, in a certain sense, occurred. For example, I cannot alter the fact that Luther was born or that he nailed the 95 theses to the church door. However, I can bring it about that Luther has a certain property, i.e. that he was born 502 years before I wrote this, by writing this within a certain time span. This non-future-indifferent property he did not have until I wrote this, though it is now a property possessed by a long-deceased Luther. More relevant to our case, by eating an omelet Clarence can bring it about not only that a certain belief of God is true, but that God has a certain belief, though Clarence cannot alter a prior belief because he is precluded from doing so by virtue of an omniscient God already having that belief. In the latter case there are precluding conditions, in the former not.

Regarding (2), there is a difference between the conditions which preclude our altering the past and those which give the *appearance* that we cannot act freely in bringing about the future. We cannot alter the past because the event has already occurred. And we cannot alter the future which God already believes (cannot do other than God believes we will do) because (from God's perspective of foreknowledge) it is as if we have already done the event. That in the one case the act was done, and that in the other it is as if done, are both the precluding conditions for our not being able to alter the past or the future known by God, and at the same time are the conditions for God having the relevant beliefs. It is this latter which gives the (mistaken) appearance that we cannot freely bring about the future.

But note that neither case—our inability to alter the past nor our inability to alter the future known by God—speaks to the question of human freedom, for both the past action which was done and the action which we have yet to do can still have been or be free respectively. That is, though we cannot alter the future which God foresees because for him it is as if already performed, we can freely bring about the future, for the ground of his foreseeing it is our bringing it about. Hence, epistemologically the freely bringing it about precedes and determines his foreseeing and believing it. That is, there is nothing for him to

foresee or believe with respect to Clarence's eating the omelet except what Clarence brings about. Similarly with the past; there is nothing for God (or us) to know about the past unless that past is brought about.

In short, though we are unable to alter the past (because it is past) and the future which God knows (for the reason that God has certain beliefs about it), the inability to alter has no implications for our ability in the past to bring about freely the past or now to bring about the future. We can freely bring about the future by our actions (because God's beliefs about our actions are conditioned by our actions), and, with respect to God's beliefs about the future, in a meaningful way bring about the past (because again God's beliefs about our actions are conditioned by our actions).

If I am correct about this, then there really is an equivocation going on in (B4) and (B5), for there really is a significant difference between bringing about and altering. If there is an equivocation, then the compatibilist can agree that (B4) is true in sense (b) but at the same time hold that it is irrelevant to (B5) understood as relevant [i.e. as sense (a)] to the issue of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. And (B4) and (B5) are both false if interpreted in sense (a). Consequently, the compatibilist is not impaled on either of the horns of Hasker's dilemma.

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NOTES

1. William Hasker, "Foreknowledge and Necessity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (Apr. 1985), pp. 121-157. References to the article will be placed in the text.

2. To put it another way, it makes sense to have a set of propositions, namely about God's beliefs about future contingents of free agency, which it is in someone's power—specifically the agent of those actions—to make false. This, of course, does not mean that God held false beliefs, only that statements to the effect that he held certain beliefs would be false, depending on what we do.

3. It is this which mitigates Hasker's critique of the way we handled (B4). Hasker argues that interpretation (a) will not work for (B4) because "the consequent of (B4) has to do with a power which must be exercised *under the circumstance* that God has always believed a certain thing (e.g., that Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow). So (B4) stands, and so does my argument for incompatibilism" (in personal conversation). But God's belief regarding Clarence stands under the circumstance that it is true that Clarence will eat the omelet (which he labels B1), and this is true because Clarence will in fact eat the omelet at T_2 . Thus Clarence actually eating the omelet at T_2 conditions the remainder, and in particular, Clarence's inability to alter God's belief regarding his eating. It is not enough to plead that God eternally believes x; the ground of this belief must be sought.